

Book Reviews

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Why the French don't like Headscarves. Islam, the State and Public Space

John R. Bowen

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This book was written by an American anthropologist, studying the reactions of French citizens and authorities with respect to the problem of integration of Muslims in a lay society (*société laïque*), and more specifically to the law that was passed in 2004 forbidding headscarves in schools.

Now, the present reviewer is a French citizen, and hence part of the vast cohort studied by the author! This has the possible drawback of not being as detached as could be wished, but does have the advantage of knowing French society from the inside and being able to point out any errors (most of them minor, I hasten to say).

I must confess at the outset, that the catchy title of the book caused me to approach it in a diffident state of mind. 'Why the French Don't like Headscarves' obviously makes a potential reader assume that the French don't like headscarves and that the author will explain the reasons for this attitude. Now, first, I am always suspicious of any book that claims to give a definitive and clear answer to a complicated problem, and second, what exactly does 'the French' mean?

Fortunately, reading the book dispelled most of my fears. The author does indeed show that the problem is complicated and he certainly does not provide a clear-cut answer. Besides, he unambiguously makes clear that French society, the political parties, and even the government were divided on this issue, and that there was a sizeable fraction of French citizens (including, many, but by no means all Muslims) who 'liked headscarves'. So why this title?

In the first part of the book, the author gives a rather convincing analysis of the historical context of the attitude towards Islam in French society. He points out the importance of the French colonial past and of the 1905 law instituting the separation of State and religion (meaning Catholicism) and *laïcité*. Since Philippe IV, 'the rather bloody king nonetheless called Philippe le Bel' (why this comment? Philippe was not more 'bloody' than the average king at the time, and even if he

had been, it had nothing to do with his beauty) there has been a continuing effort, on the part of State authorities, and even by the clergy, to emancipate the Church of France from Rome (*Gallicanisme*). The author rightly sees that as an element accounting for the desire to institute a French Islam (although there is no Islamic equivalent to Rome, a difficulty the author unfortunately does not address). Bowen makes the correct distinction between ‘religion’, which the Republic does not recognize, and ‘cults’ which the Ministry of the Interior can organize, but he apparently forgets the distinction in the following pages, translating ‘Bureau central des Cultes’ in the Ministry, as ‘Central office of organized Religion’.

In the second part, Bowen gives a very good account of the national controversy, somewhat blown-up by the media, which stemmed from the expulsion from their schools of a few Muslim girls wearing headscarves. Bowen interviewed a number of the actors, on both sides, from the top levels of government down to some expelled girls, and produces a well-balanced account. He then shows how the ‘Stasi Commission’ was set up to investigate the problem and suggest solutions, and he describes all the stages leading to the March 2004 Law. The law reads as follows: ‘In public primary and secondary schools, wearing signs or clothes by which pupils clearly (*ostensiblement*) display a religious affiliation is forbidden’. What exactly was meant by ‘*ostensiblement*’ was, of course, a matter of much debate. With a view to not appearing to single out Muslims, the forbidden signs, in addition to the veil (*le voile*), included kippas and ‘large’ crosses. The law was, of course, too ambiguous to be of much use to the heads of schools: how much hair would have to be covered before the veil becomes *ostensible*, how large would a ‘large’ cross be, and should the obdurate pupils be expelled, etc?

Incidentally, one might ask why there never was any problem with the *voile* at universities, where the fact that some students wear a headscarf is generally taken in one’s stride. I wish the author had, at least summarily, addressed this problem.

The third part deals with the important questions of communalism (*communautarisme*), Islamism and sexism. It contains many judicious remarks, notably about the ‘jacobin heritage’ and the internal contradictions of ‘*laïcité*’. The media, and especially the TV talk-show hosts, are justifiably shown deficient in not letting the invited personalities state their viewpoints when not ‘politically correct’. However, this last part gives the impression of being somewhat less well-balanced than the first two parts. To give only one example, Bowen picks on the media about their negative attitude toward the controversial Tariq Ramadan, but he passes rapidly over Ramadan’s refusal to condemn outright stoning of women, proposing instead a ‘moratorium’ on stoning. The notion of ‘Islamism’ is admittedly fuzzy, but one is not much wiser after reading the chapter devoted to it, and the link with terrorism in the press and in people’s minds is glossed over.

Bowen is obviously very well informed on French history and institutions. It is therefore surprising that he let pass so many factual mistakes: Dreyfus was a captain, not a colonel; the *Assistance Publique* is the system of Paris hospitals, not specifically 'for the needy'; 20 is not 'an unusually high grade' in school, it is *the* top grade; cardinal Lustiger was the archbishop of Paris, not 'the Vatican's representative' (that would be the papal nuncio); ID cards do not now mention religion, nor did they in 1961, and so on.

Although Bowen tries, on the whole successfully, to act as a dispassionate anthropologist, he cannot sometimes hide the fact that he hails from the United States of America. For instance, when he alludes, correctly, to the 'French philosophical ideas about the properly private role of religion in modern society', one feels that these ideas are somewhat foreign to the citizen of a country whose currency bears the motto 'In God we trust' and whose President is sworn in, with his hand on a Bible.

On the whole, this is a well-written, scholarly book; all the sources, whether primary or secondary, are referenced. I also enjoyed the way Bowen sums up the reactions of the people he interviews or sees on TV, by vividly describing their significant gestures in such a way that one can almost see them (at least if one is French!).

This is a case story bearing on a general and important problem, not only in France, but also in most European countries. It is a book well worth reading.

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The Formative Years of Young Scholars

U. Teichler (Editor)

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This is a time when all aspects of education seem to be under review. The demands of the technologically advancing society and of the global dimension require a re-evaluation of the objectives of education and its means of delivery. This book is the result of a conference organised by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Academia Europaea in November 2005 to consider the years beyond the first